

## Overwhelmed by Workplace Stress? You're not alone.

Americans are known for placing great emphasis on work and career. Working hard, however, should not be confused with overworking at the expense of relationships and physical health. According to a 2007 nationwide poll by the American Psychological Association, three-quarters of Americans list work as a significant source of stress, with over half of those surveyed indicating that their work productivity suffered due to stress. Furthermore, almost half stated that they did not use their allotted vacation time and even considered looking for a new job because of stress. Job stress is also a concern for employers, costing U.S. businesses an estimated \$300 billion per year through absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover and direct medical, legal and insurance fees.

Stress can significantly affect physical health. The APA survey found three quarters of people have experienced physical symptoms as a result of stress, such as headache, fatigue, and an upset stomach in combination with feelings of irritability, anger, nervousness, and lack of motivation.

The stress people are experiencing comes, in part, from the pressures of today's connected world. Because of e-mail, cell phones and the Internet, Americans are finding it increasingly difficult to switch off from the stresses of the workplace and concentrate on their personal priorities--over half of respondents said that job demands interfered with family or home responsibilities.

“While technology undoubtedly improves our lives, information overload can add to the stress levels of an already overworked nation and lead to using unhealthy behaviors to cope with that stress,” says psychologist David Ballard, Psy.D, MBA, of the American Psychological Association. “What is important is to learn how to effectively manage your stress, so you can perform at your best both at home and at work.”

Increased stress can lead to using unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, comfort eating, poor diet choices, inactivity and drinking alcohol to manage their stress. APA warns that reliance on such behavior can lead to long-term, serious health problems and offers these strategies for managing your work-related stress:

- **Know yourself.** Be aware of your stress level and know what stresses you out. People experience stress in different ways. You may have a hard time concentrating or making decisions, feel angry, irritable or out of control, or experience headaches, muscle tension or a lack of energy. Learn your own stress signals.
- **Recognize how you deal with stress.** Do you engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, drinking or eating poorly to cope with your stress? Do you lose patience with your children or spouse or coworkers when you feel overwhelmed by work pressures?
- **Turn off and tune in.** Communication technology can take you to productivity heights never imagined, but it can also allow work to creep into family time, dinner and vacations. Set rules for yourself, such as turning

off your cell phone or BlackBerry when you get home, or establishing certain times when you return calls. Be sure to communicate those rules to others, so you can manage their expectations. Let technology be a tool that works for you, rather than the other way around.

- Keep a "To-Do" list. Worried that you'll forget something important? Constantly thinking through all the things you need to get done? Clear your head and put those thoughts on paper (or in an electronic task list) by creating a list of work and personal tasks and marking those with the highest priority. Not only will you reduce the risk of forgetting something, you'll also be better able to focus on the task at hand.
- Take short breaks. Stay energized and productive by taking a minute or two periodically throughout the day to stand up, stretch, breathe deeply and shake off the accumulating tension. Short breaks between tasks can be particularly effective, helping you feel like you've wrapped up one thing before moving on to the next. Take a 10-15 minute break every few hours to recharge and avoid the temptation to work through lunch. The productivity you gain will more than make up for the time you spend on break.
- Find healthy ways to manage stress. Work to replace unhealthy coping strategies, such as eating junk food, smoking or drinking alcohol with healthy behaviors, like exercise, meditation or talking with friends and family. Keep in mind that unhealthy behaviors develop over time and can be difficult to change. Take it slow and focus on changing one behavior at a time. Some behaviors are very difficult to change and may require the help of a licensed professional such as a psychologist.
- Take care of yourself. Eat right, get enough sleep, drink plenty of water and engage in regular physical activity. Ensure you have a healthy mind and body through activities like yoga, taking a short walk, going to the gym or playing sports that will enhance both your physical and mental health. Take regular vacations. No matter how hectic life gets, make time for yourself—even if it's just simple things like reading a good book, listening to your favorite album or enjoying a leisurely Sunday brunch at your favorite café.
- Ask for professional support. Accepting help from supportive friends and family can improve your ability to manage stress. Your employer may also have stress management resources available through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), including online information, available counseling and referral to mental health professionals, if needed. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by work stress, you may want to talk to a psychologist, who can help you better manage stress and change unhealthy behavior.

Employers can visit [www.phwa.org](http://www.phwa.org) for information and resources to help your employees and organization thrive.

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